

MEXICAN INDEMNITY BILL.

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REMARKS

OF

MR. ALLEN, OF MASSACHUSETTS,

DELIVERED

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, FEB. 25 AND 26, 1851,

ON

THE MEXICAN INDEMNITY BILL.

House of Representatives of the United States, February 25, 1851.—Evening Session.

The Mexican Indemnity Bill being under consideration, and an amendment directing the manner of the payment of the last installment having been proposed—

Mr. ALLEN said :

I am glad to hear the inquiry of the gentleman from South Carolina, [Mr. BURT,] how it happened the payment of these installments was arranged by the Secretary of State, instead of the Secretary of the Treasury. I know very well that in the negotiation of treaties, the State Department is the proper agent of the Government. But when such negotiations are closed, and there remains to be done nothing but the payment of money from the Treasury, it would seem that the discharge of that duty properly belongs to the head of the Treasury Department.

If I am right in assuming that position, I am opposed to any transfer of official duty from the officer who is presumed to be selected for his fitness to take charge of the pecuniary concerns of the Government, to another functionary whose qualifications may be of an entirely opposite character. I have heard no reason assigned for a departure from that mode of proceeding, which clearly appears to be fit and proper, except the statement that the subject had been considered in the Cabinet of the late President, by whom the duty had been devolved upon the late Secretary of State. However that may be, Mr. Clayton declined to interfere with the business of the Treasury, and refused to enter into any negotiations respecting it. But it so happened that soon after the appointment of the present Secretary of State, that officer assumed the whole business of arranging the payments which were due by treaty to Mexico. I will not say that within three days from the induction of the Secretary into office, Messrs. Corcoran & Riggs were assured of the profitable job of disbursing the immense sums of money which were to be paid to Mexico, but believe that the negotiation was completed with very remarkable promptitude, and to the exclusion of all competition.

I know of nothing in the transaction which tends to implicate Corcoran

& Riggs, or any other bankers whose names have been mentioned in this transaction. I see nothing dishonorable or improper in them. There is nothing on their part, so far as this transaction is concerned, which differs from the ordinary course of business. It is not because I impute anything improper to these bankers, that I have alluded to this subject, but because the business ought to have been transacted by the Secretary of the Treasury. If it is necessary that the business should be transacted by means of bankers, I can see no objection to it. But it is certainly a very dangerous experiment to take this matter from the hands of that officer who is selected, or who is presumed to be selected, for his fitness to perform the duties of that office, and place it in the hands of another, selected for no such qualifications.

But, sir, I have a further objection against this transfer of duties, which I shall now bring forward.

This business of negotiating means for carrying out pecuniary concerns with a foreign Government, has been spoken of as a matter of great delicacy. But it becomes a matter of greater delicacy, when the Secretary of State, without any reason, assumes upon himself the direction of these matters. Now, among all the men connected with the Government, he is the most exceptionable man to have any transactions of a pecuniary concern with bankers and brokers; he, who holds his place as Secretary of State less as a servant and stipendiary of the Government, than a servant and stipendiary of bankers and brokers.

Sir, I speak these things with reluctance, but they should be said by somebody, and as no gentleman has arisen here and said them, I do it. I speak of facts which are notorious, as notorious in New York and Boston, if not in this city, as any other transaction in the recent history of the country. The Secretary of State comes here, not for the compensation which the laws of your Government allow to that officer as a remuneration for his services, but he comes here for a much higher compensation—with far greater pecuniary inducements furnished him—and furnished him by the bankers of Wall street and State street.

Now, I repeat, that it is a fact which is not only notorious in Boston, but in the whole country, that when that gentleman was called upon to take the office of Secretary of State—a position which he now holds—and to receive for pay a compensation which the Government deems sufficient for the frugal support of the officers who shall be called to perform the duties of that office—he entered into an arrangement, by which it was agreed that a large sum of money should be raised for him, as an inducement to assume his present position. Twenty-five thousand dollars was to be raised in Boston, as the final result of that arrangement, and the like sum in the city of New York. I have it from authority which cannot be doubted, that such an arrangement, proceeding from the suggestion of the Secretary himself, was actually made; and I have most satisfactory reasons for believing that the arrangement was actually carried out by the raising of \$25,000 in New York, and about \$20,000 in Boston.

I believe there are men within the sound of my voice who can sustain me in these assertions. I believe there are persons within this Hall who have particular information upon this very subject.

Now, sir, I do not know how the fact strikes the House that the highest officer in your Government, with the exception of the President

should take office upon the understanding and inducement of receiving large sums of money from a certain description of men doing business in our cities. I do not know with what degree of apprehension gentlemen may regard the influences which such a state of things must throw around the official stipendiary.

There was a time in the earlier and purer days of the Republic, when no party could have been found which would not condemn the transaction, regardless of the man, or of the official influence he might possess in the Government. And will parties in this House approve or palliate it? Has the Whig party so far degenerated from its professed character at a former period that it will seek to conceal or openly vindicate the dangerous abuse?

But, sir, however it may be with the Whig party, let me cast my eye for a moment upon the other side of the House. I desire to know in what light such arrangements are regarded by the Democratic party? Divided and broken as that party is, I trust it retains enough of ancient profession and faith to regard this transaction with stern indignation. "There was a Brutus once that would have let the infernal devil hold his place in Rome" as soon as a stipendiary of Wall street and State street.

I trust the members of the Democratic party will be disposed to probe this matter to the bottom. I have but exposed the surface. They will then be able to determine how far it is expedient unnecessarily to place pecuniary negotiations of the Government, in the accomplishment of which fortunes are to be made by agents of the Government, in the hands of any man who stands not before the country in an attitude of independence of those who wield the money power of the country.

On the morning of the 26th of February, the subject again coming up, Mr. ALLEN said :

In the course of the discussion of this matter which is now before the committee, it will be remembered that I spoke last evening upon the subject. I was followed by one or two individuals, with remarks which were highly vituperative in their character, and entirely personal from beginning to end. I ask now the indulgence and magnanimity of the committee to allow me to reply to those personalities, and I promise not to occupy the time of the House more than half an hour. I hope the committee will afford me this opportunity. I ask their unanimous consent to reply to the remarks of my colleague, [Mr. ASHMUN,] last evening.

Mr. JONES. I object.

A VOICE. You are entitled to four minutes yet.

Mr. ALLEN. It is impossible for me to meet the remarks which have been made in the space of five minutes. I am quite surprised that objection should be made. I hope I shall not again be interrupted.

Mr. CASEY. I object.

Mr. ALLEN. I ask if this committee will refuse to do me this simple act of justice?

Cries of "Go on!" "go on!"

Mr. ALLEN. I took occasion, on last evening, to remark, among other things—

Mr. CASEY. I rise to a point of order. My point of order is, that the gentleman from New Jersey [Mr. KING] cannot yield the floor to the gentleman from Massachusetts, [Mr. ALLEN,] for the purpose of making a speech, except by unanimous consent.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman from Massachusetts is entitled to the floor.

Mr. ALLEN. I hope the gentleman from Pennsylvania has now sufficiently shown his zeal to carry out strictly the rules of the House, to be satisfied, and not again encroach upon the four minutes which are allotted to me.

Mr. CASEY. I rise to another point of order. The gentleman from Massachusetts has already spoken on this subject, and cannot make another speech as long as any other gentleman wants the floor.

The CHAIRMAN. No other gentleman claimed the floor. The gentleman from Massachusetts is entitled to the floor, and will proceed.

Mr. ALLEN. I stated to this House the circumstances under which the Secretary of State came into his office. I informed the House, if they were not sufficiently informed of the fact before, that he stood in his place as much a hired agent and stipendiary of Wall street and State street, as a servant of the Government and country. I gave you the particulars of the arrangement by which certain gentlemen came forward and voluntarily contributed their means to carry out that arrangement. I stated the terms of that arrangement, by which, upon the call of the Secretary himself, a certain sum of money was to be paid in Boston, and a like sum in New York, as a compensation for his accepting the office of Secretary of State. Now, how were these statements met? With facts? Not at all. Were they treated as facts, of no importance if true? Not at all. I did not hear any distinct declaration of my colleague—for I cannot speak of his broken utterance last evening as containing any distinct declaration—that the statements I made were substantially untrue. But, notwithstanding a member of this House had felt it to be his duty, upon his responsibility, to utter grave facts for the consideration of the House, one gentleman and another rises for the purpose of diverting the attention of the House from the true point of inquiry, and to excite prejudice against the member who has brought forward these facts.

[Here the hammer fell.]

Cries of "Go on!" "go on!"

Mr. CASEY. I object.

Mr. ASHMUN. I suppose I can speak on the amendment five minutes.

Mr. BAYLY. I am entitled to the floor.

Mr. ASHMUN. I ask the gentleman from Virginia to allow me to go on. I wish now to meet what I did not choose to meet, and what I was not ready to meet, last evening.

Mr. CARTTER. I rise to a point of order. The point I make is this: The committee have refused the gentleman from Massachusetts [Mr. ALLEN] time for his defence, and the floor was assigned to the chairman of the Committee of Ways and Means, [Mr. BAYLY,] who hands it over to the person against whom this defence was to be made. The point of order which I make is, that the chairman of the Committee of Ways and Means has no such right.

Mr. BAYLY, (in his seat.) I never pretended to have any such right.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman from Virginia is entitled to the floor, and cannot yield except for explanation.

Mr. BURT. I desire to make one suggestion. I understand the gentleman from Virginia [Mr. BAYLY] cannot yield the floor to either of the gentlemen from Massachusetts for the purpose of speaking upon the matter on which they wish to speak. I therefore propose that, by unanimous consent, twenty minutes be allowed.

A MEMBER. "Agreed." "No objection."

Mr. ALLEN appealed to his colleague [Mr. ASHMUN] to read Mr. Webster's denial, if he had it, as he intimated at that time that he (Mr. ALLEN) might have a chance to reply to it.

Mr. ASHMUN refused.

Mr. ALLEN. My colleague refuses to give the denial at this time. I wish the committee so to understand it. It will then be for the committee to say whether there shall be hereafter an opportunity to reply or not. I stated that there was no denial last evening of the statement I made yesterday. Does my colleague mean to deny it now? If he does, I will meet that denial with proof. I am ready for the issue whenever and wherever it may be made. All I ask is, that the Secretary of State and his friends will not resist an investigation, but will give me an opportunity to bring forward the facts, and I here pledge myself to this committee that, notwithstanding any denial, I will prove the existence of the arrangement I have disclosed.

After Mr. Webster received the offer of an appointment to his present office, he wrote to Boston for the purpose of ascertaining what would be done for him in respect to pecuniary matters. It was agreed that the sum of \$25,000 should be raised for him in Boston, and the same amount in New York. I am assured that the full sum was subscribed in the latter city, but that it fell somewhat short in Boston, amounting to \$19,600. Gentlemen in Boston had bled so freely on former occasions of a similar character, that it was difficult to raise the full amount.

Now, I repeat, that if the Secretary of State has had such an arrangement with the merchants and bankers of New York and Boston, he is a most exceptionable person to have the management of the pecuniary negotiations of this Government. That is what I say. No matter, if it could be shown that the money was a voluntary gift. Every one knows for what purposes commercial men make pecuniary gifts to men high in office, and a man of true independence would have rejected it. He would have looked with distrust and fear upon gifts which involve obligation, or the suspicion of obligation, to particular interests and classes of men, and would have cast it from him. But so far from a reluctant acceptance even, of the gift by the Secretary of State, the country will be satisfied, if the facts can reach it, that it was sought by that officer before he assumed the duties of his place.

And now, sir, I ask, if such influences brought to bear upon a high functionary of State are not dangerous to public justice, to all the interests of the country, and especially dangerous, when pecuniary concerns of immense amount are placed in the hands of such officer, or assumed by him?

Now, what was the reply of my colleague last evening? He said his

colleague [Mr. A.] was sent here to uphold the cause of human liberty, and endeavored to enlist the prejudices of a large majority of this House against the political character of the speaker; and the gentleman from Alabama [Mr. HILLIARD] soon chimed in with his sweet voice. It was an attempt to close the ear of the House against the truth by calling up political prejudices, and thereby diverting attention from the real issue which was before it.

Sir, whatever my political sentiments may be, I can appeal to all the members of this House to bear me witness that I have been frank, open, and undisguised. I make no speeches for one part of the country, and allow the papers in this city and south of it to publish them as made, and some time afterwards write out a different version of those same speeches for some country newspaper at home, which is never seen south of Mason & Dixon's line. I do not whisper to you in one place that I am the friend of southern measures, and hold out an opposite policy to my constituents. On the other hand, gentlemen will do me the justice to say that I have not unduly obtruded my opinions upon the House. It seems to me that the aspersions which my colleague and his confederate have cast upon me will fail of effecting their purpose, and must recoil upon their own heads, and upon the cause they would by such means sustain. This House and the country will not be borne away from the true issue by this attempt to divert attention from it, and to smother the truth under the weight of sectional and party prejudice.

My colleague has seen fit to assail me upon matters altogether disconnected with the subject before the House. The impotence of the attack may perhaps extort a pardon for its malignity. But of what consequence is it to this House, or what has it to do with the subject of its inquiry, that, in consequence of the law peculiar to Massachusetts which requires a majority over all competitors, no election has yet been made in my district, though two trials have taken place, and my plurality is some twelve hundred or fifteen hundred over my Whig opponent? For what purpose does the malice of my colleague thus vent itself? As to coalitions, sir, I know of none in my district; but in the district of my assailant there has been for years a coalition of the strangest character, by which he has been kept in his seat. It is a coalition of men of entirely opposite characters—one part adhering to the representative through the force of party ties, and the other portion brought into sympathy with the incumbent through affinities of a far different nature. If any one is curious to investigate the history and character of this remarkable combination, there are probably at all times some around the Capitol who can fully unfold them.

Objection is made to any disclosure of the infirmities of the Secretary, and this objection comes from the member from Alabama, [Mr. HILLIARD,] on the ground of the greatness of that individual. However much the public interest may require investigation into the conduct of that gentleman, the shield, not of place merely, but also of high intellectual character, is to be thrown over him. And here let me do faint justice to the singular speech of the member from Alabama. It seems that the gentleman has found a way to solve the problem which He, whose servant the gentleman assumes to be one day in seven, declared to be hard and even impossible of solution. He has found out how to "serve two

"masters." Rising from his seat, when an opportunity was afforded him, to bow in adoration to the source of preferment and worldly honor, the glorious vision of a foreign embassy passing before his bedazzled eyes, he poured forth strains of poetic praise, so touching and so beautiful that the enthusiasm of his friend from South Carolina [Mr. HOLMES] was excited to the highest pitch of ecstatic joy. I confess to the possession of a taste less fortunate, and could not feel all the emotion of that gentleman as the member from Alabama pronounced his sentences, made up of glittering fragments borrowed from this orator and that orator, from poets of all times, living and dead.

To gratify his taste, rather than my own, I will indulge the gentleman from Alabama with one quotation, which, at the moment of his speech, occurred to my mind as affording the only mode of accounting for the gentleman's display of himself. It must, indeed, be that he "had been to a feast of languages, and stolen the scraps."

But, sir, to treat this argument with due seriousness, let me repeat, in substance, what not long since I had occasion to say, that I know well enough the great intelligence of that distinguished man, Daniel Webster. I know very well the power of his mighty intellect—how it stands out in monstrous disproportion to every other attribute of the man. I bow in silent wonder before the mysterious dispensation of Providence, which saw fit to confer so much of intellectual power where there was so little moral strength.

What is knowledge, what is talent, without goodness, as a guide in the affairs of life? And, what but a demon would the greatest intellect which the Deity ever created be, if it stood independent of goodness?

The world has had examples of men in all ages, who were gifted with great powers of intellect, and who yet would fall before temptations which the feeblest of mankind often resist. The instances, as you know, have not been few, but many—so many, that I trust the people have long since learned to disregard the dictation of mere intellect, where there are no qualities of the heart, also, upon which they can rely.

I call to mind, at this moment, one of the most distinguished men the world ever knew. It will be no disparagement to say that he possessed an intellect superior even to that of Mr. Webster himself. Certainly his attainments, in every department of knowledge, were far superior. And yet he sank before temptations which the weakest resist, and was dismissed from the highest place of State in disgrace and with contempt. That man, characterized as

"Wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind,"

stands on the page of history as a warning to the world that intelligence and virtue are not inseparably combined, and that you must see to it, that the brilliant intellect, to which you turn for guidance and direction, is itself controlled and directed by unwavering principle.

It is further insisted that I should not have disclosed the facts I have communicated to the House, because, forsooth, the Secretary is a Massachusetts man. Sir, I am proud of the statesmen of Massachusetts, when there is combined in them the brilliancy of a mighty intellect with unswerving integrity of purpose. I have learned the true character of a Massachusetts statesman from the history of the lights of other days—from the Adamses, Quinceys, Otises, and their associate patriots—from

the men whose character bore the stamp of revolutionary patriotism. They were not the men who sought "preferment for its gold," but when they entered upon office they entered upon the road which led inevitably away from wealth and luxury. They were content to serve their country, dying, if need be, nobly poor, and leaving to their posterity that good name which is better than riches. What would have been thought of Samuel Adams, when he was selected to go to Philadelphia and put his name to the Declaration of Independence, or to meet at any other time the Continental Congress, if he had first demanded to know what the merchants of Boston or New York would give him for the service? Sir, such a transaction would have dimmed the fame of Washington himself.

Now, let any man say aught against the fame of such a statesman of Massachusetts, living or dead, and I will be the first to vindicate it. But when I am told that I ought to have been silent, and withheld from the House facts within my knowledge, important to be known, because they might not reflect honor upon a statesman who now hails from Massachusetts, I deny the obligation.

The greatest reason for the suppression of truth, is that which my colleague, near the close of his remarks, saw fit to adduce. If I understand the allusion to the Secretary's "salt," my colleague intends by that to insinuate that I have at some time, not very recently, partaken of a State dinner with the Secretary; and this official courtesy, which is extended to opponents as well as friends, should have sealed my lips in eternal silence. From that time forth the Representative of the people, it would seem, having received his equivalent, must be blind to all official wrong.

Such, sir, seems to be my colleague's opinion of the potent efficacy of the Secretary's "salt." And does my colleague think that a Representative is to be bought with a State dinner? Let me tell him that I am unfit to hold that relation to this House and the country, if even the bestowment of a lucrative office upon any relation of mine—a brother, for instance—would induce me to withhold one fact which the interests of my constituents required to be known. No, sir; though that office should be the very lucrative one of purser in the Navy, however it may excite the surprise of my colleague, it would be thrown away, if it were given with the hope of impairing in my person, in the slightest degree, the freedom of debate in this House.

Sir, when there is time and opportunity I shall, here or elsewhere, review the obligations of Massachusetts, and especially of my constituents and myself, to Mr. Webster. I hope to state the account with rigid justice and truth.

[Here the hammer fell.]